

Reading Gramsci and Reading Althusser A Philosophy for Dialectical Materialism - Irfan Ajvazi



Without writing a book on this book (and believe me, I'm tempted) I'm going to try to keep this simple.

However, this classic working-Marxist text is anything but simple.

The first more-than-half of it has enough variations on political principles to make an Ism out of Isms, going into vast detail about enough 1910-1930 Italian politics INCLUDING the rise of Mussolini, post-revolution Russia political movements, and even some French.

As for me, I know enough history to be slightly dangerous, but trying to follow THIS Trotskyian/Italian Fascism/ polemical nightmare without having BEEN there and STEEPED in the times makes me realize that I am out of my depth. Slightly. BUT these Selections from the Prison Notebooks come with a pretty awesome bonus.

It has commentary. Whew!!!

Getting something out of the almost Naturalist descriptions, all the play-by-play political dealings of all these countries as they undergo a Marxist transformation, is more of a matter of letting the IDEAS sink in rather than hearing a formal statement. Indeed, the text is full of short maxims that felt more like reading Nietzsche than anything resembling a Social Science.

However, for me at least, none of THAT was as impressive or thought-provoking as what came in the second half of his writings.

The rest is philosophy. Fine philosophy that tries to drag the study of massive social movements out of the realm of art and into the realm of science. I swear, he was probably trying to pull a Wittgenstein on his logic, but really, I know he was just pulling a Hegelian argument.

Here's the weird thing about Gramsci: most of the later Marxist thinkers love the hell out of him, but first they had to pour over his overly complicated text to root out those rare nuggets of wisdom like pigs hunting for truffles. There is nothing overly clear about anything he has written.

Almost ALL of my understanding of Gramsci comes from the (much) later commentaries.

Some exceptions exist, however.

I got the clear impression that Common Sense, in the parlance that he uses it, is the core of any nascent or growing political theory. But Common Sense, as he uses it, is often very uncommon and is almost ALWAYS used to drive the unthinking masses into positions that may not (or likely probably not) be in their best interests. It's the idea that if you want to drive the people to do what you want, then first you must convince them that YOUR ideas are simple Common Sense whether or not it has anything to do with whether it BENEFITS them or not.

A common modern example is using any or all of the moral foundations [See Here](#) to whip a people into a frenzy (Pro-Life, for example,) and use this as a COMPLETE platform to push through a wide set of policies that will probably drain the constituents of all their self-respect, drive them to perform horrendous acts of racism, or even steal their money -- but it's perfectly valid because at least the prime tenet of (Pro-Life) is kept sacrosanct.

As Gramsci would put it, you must never get so intellectual that you lose the heart of the argument, and never be so emotionally riled up that you lose the core intellectual awesomeness. In other words, you always need to find that sweet spot and change tactics for your audience. (Gramsci was never so straightforward, however. We get our modern concepts of this from him, distilled over time and use.)

Another great (or disturbing) feature of Gramsci is the full, detailed descriptions of how Fascism came to its rise in Italy. How it could convince so many people to dehumanize and create enemies out of the other side.

It is a slow, painstaking process, but please refer to the Moral Foundations Theory I linked to above and couple it with massive, massive repetitions. This is the core of changing the basic Common Sense of a people. If you change the dialogue, if you change the fundamental NARRATIVE, then you can drive people to believe and do ANYTHING.

As people in Italy used to say, \"Eh, I hate fascism, but at least they got the trains to run on time.\"",

LET'S NOT TAKE THIS AS A GREAT EXAMPLE, EH?

After all, a little intelligence can get any train to run on time. It doesn't take fascism to do anything except have a whole people eat itself.

All in all, this is some pretty interesting food for thought. And trust me, I barely scratched the surface. I hope I piqued your interest, however.

If we don't know our history, we will always be doomed to repeat it.

Gramsci's writings cover a wide ground. He interprets Machiavelli in a modern context, describing political parties as \"the modern Prince\" and explores the opportunities consequences that follow. He muses about America's capitalistic spirit, its connection to Taylorism, and if Ford's invasive approach to managing personal morality in employees' lives will come to affect Europe. He discuss Italian history in depth, particularly exploring the city-countryside conflict and how regional differences between northern and southern Italy affect political movements.

Where his writing remains the most relevant a century later, though, is his \"Study of Philosophy\". Gramsci is intensely focused with the practical application of philosophical theory. How are new philosophical conceptions of the world accepted into \"common sense\"? How are masses of people turned into active citizens interested in revolution? Certainly his own experience as political activist and leader contributes.

For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a \"philosophical\" event far more important and \"original\" than the discovery by some philosophical \"genius\" of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals.

Gramsci explores how a new conception takes hold of a social group, comparing a rational approach to an authoritative one, and instead making a more sociologically-based conclusion in the power of groups. \"Philosophy can only be experienced by faith\", faith \"in the social group to which [someone] belongs\". And in fact, Gramsci makes a highly rational case for the \"man of the people\" to trust his social group above others:

Anyone with a superior intellectual formation with a point of view opposed to his can put forward arguments than

he and really tear him to pieces logically and so on. But should the man of the people change his opinions just because of this? In that case he might find himself having to change every day, or every time he meets an ideological adversary who is his intellectual superior. [...] The man of the people thinks that so many like-thinking people can't be wrong [...] and he remembers, indeed, hearing expounded, discursively, coherently, in a way that left him convinced, the reasons behind his faith.

How, then, to spread ideas? Gramsci draws from the history of organized religion, which "maintains its community of faithful" by "indefatigably repeating its apologetics... and maintaining a hierarchy of intellectuals who give to the faith... the dignity of thought", and turns his observations into recommendations for cultural movements:

1. Never to tire of repeating its own arguments (though offering literary variation of form): repetition is the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality.
2. To work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace, in other words, to give a personality to the amorphous mass element. This means working to produce élites of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset.

This latter point relates closely to the concept of "organic intellectuals", a key element in Gramsci's model—a role involved at a local, community level, diffusing ideas among people who wouldn't encounter them otherwise. Gramsci lists occupations that typically fill this role: politicians, priests, administrators, in addition to the traditional intelligentsia. Today this seems close to occupations we'd call "knowledge workers".

However, Gramsci is careful to separate this role from that of traditional intellectuals. He emphasizes "contact with the 'simple'" as an antidote for "creating a specialised culture among restricted intellectual groups". He later goes further, criticizing common trends among intellectuals:

The popular element "feels" but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element "knows" but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel. The two extremes are therefore pedantry and philistinism on the one hand and blind passion and sectarianism on the other. Not that the pedant cannot be impassioned; far from it. Impassioned pedantry is every bit as ridiculous and dangerous as the wildest sectarianism and demagoguery. The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned. [...] One cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation.

This is a critical conclusion with relevance far beyond the time Gramsci was writing for. Pedantry and hyper-rationalism abound, particularly in debates online: writers and commenters vie for the most logical and rational argument and are shocked when it rarely convinces. Gramsci's critiques show us that these fallacies are anything but new, while pointing in a better direction.

Taken as a whole, the book contains a challenging set of writings to get through. Gramsci's reference points fit typically within 19th- and 20th-century Italian (and sometimes French) history. Quirks in the writing are, according to the editor, typically due to circumventing the censor, given Gramsci's circumstances—these include misattributed quotes and articles to a list of euphemisms that grows the longer you read. The editor could have found-and-replaced all instances of "the founder of the philosophy of praxis" with "Marx", but instead leaves the euphemistic verbosity to the reader's experience.

Edward Said frequently cites Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals" and describes his geopolitical emphasis in history as particularly influential. Gramsci's Prison Notebooks don't contain a system for geopolitical thinking as much as they do examples, but his concepts clearly had an impact on Said's thinking and writing.

In conclusion: Gramsci's ideas on public discourse and changing the contents of "common sense" alone make his notebooks worth reading, even if you skip past the Italian history. But don't skip it if you can help it.

I decided to read this book in order to presenting a simple essay for "Critical Theory" subject at my university. Gramsci was a Neo-Marxist, he writes all the essay when he was at prison. In the beginning of chapter you will see Gramsci's brief biography. The translator nicely tells us the history and background of Gramsci's writing.

Gramsci notable work was his theory about "Hegemony", but you will never found a chapter about hegemony itself. He was spread the hegemony words in every single pages of this book. Although in his writing Gramsci never

ever mentioned "The Role of Media", many scholar (who I assume never read this book) often mentioned Gramsci's Hegemony was all about media. To be able understand Gramsci's writing you should read the first chapter of this book, titled "Intellectual Organics". Then you will understand the entire process of hegemony. Gramsci's writing is related to political studies, but you can also relating his works with media as case study.

Selections from the Prison Notebooks by Antonio Gramsci – reading this tome is enlightening and firms up my appreciation of Gramsci that is totally opposed to the liberal academic appropriation of the Italian communist thinker. Majority of Gramsci's interpreters endorse a nebulous cultural politics of hegemony that is divorced from the class struggle and historical necessity and is used to justify parliamentarism and reformist politics. For sure, The Prison Notebooks' coded writing and fragmented form left it susceptible to misinterpretation, unintentional or otherwise. But still, the work shine as a truly revolutionary document engaged in polemics against the Left Communism of Bordiga and company and their adventurist conception of a pure revolution as well as the Rightwing orthodoxy of the Second International that has seeped through some of the more hackneyed formulations of the Comintern under Stalin and Zinoviev. I am particularly thankful for the introduction and notes by the International Publishers for proving to be very helpful in providing context to Gramsci's writings. What we read in The Prison Notebooks are reflections forged in ideological struggle as well as in the life-and-death struggle by the Italian comrades of the early 20th Century against reactionaries amidst the rise of Fascism and intensified white terror. Of particular interest in Gramsci's notes are his conception of the party as an assemblage of organic intellectuals of the proletariat; the necessity of military organization (as opposed to relying on pure spontaneity) conceptualized with politics in command; the winning of hegemony by the proletariat against bourgeois domination not only capture of state but also in the realm of ideology and civil society; and in this context the need for building a national-popular bloc (which all find echoes in the strategy and tactics of the Chinese Revolution under Mao Zedong).

Gramsci was one of the most important, original and influential marxist writers of the 20th Century. He wrote extensively on the role of intellectuals, on education, history, politics, culture, the modern state and philosophy. The Prison Notebooks was written between 1929 and 1935, when Gramsci was a prisoner of the Italian fascist state under Mussolini. He developed the concept of 'hegemony', arguing that the ruling class sustained its control of society and the state through hegemonic domination of education, culture, sport, religion etc. Working class revolution would therefore only succeed if the struggle was broadened from that in the work place to a broad based struggle involving the contestation of control and space in education, culture, sport, the community etc.

Gramsci was an orthodox revolutionary historical materialist. People act like he is some post-marxist because he emphasized the dialectical nature of historical materialism. It may appear to the decontextualized that this is post-marxism as a result of it emerging on the intellectual scene amidst the ubiquity of Althusser's structural (and therefore determinist) Marxism, but this is not the case. Gramsci is one of the best authors when it comes to examining the nature of a material (and consequently cultural) paradigm shift.

Gramsci was also opposing himself to Lenin by arguing for the development and leadership of working class individuals against Lenin's desire to have a paradigm shift occur as a result of bourgeois professional revolutionists. Although he is against these two thinkers who were seen as emblematic of Marxism: he is not some revisionist coward. He is doing difficult theoretical work with the ultimate goal of overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with socialism/communism.

'Each science, as science, has in advance projected a field of objects such that to know them is to govern them.' - Gadamer, Truth and Method

'If anyone should think he has solved the problem of life and feels like telling himself that everything is quite easy now, he can see that he is wrong just by recalling that there was a time when this "solution" had not been discovered; but it must have been possible to live then too.' - Wittgenstein, stray remarks

Gadamer was not claiming hermeneutics as a science. Just the opposite, he was affirming that it's profoundly misguided to ever expect to find a 'science' of human meaning along the lines of the physical sciences.

By contrast, Althusser is extremely insistent that Marxism *is* a science. What exactly does he mean by that? At least in this collection he has rather little to say about the actual content of Marxism - history, the economy, the workers' movement, etc. He seems to define 'science' in totally formal, non-empirical terms. Somewhat like Thomas Kuhn in [The Structure of Scientific Revolutions](#); but then Kuhn's great book did serious damage to the prestige of science, for suggesting science was more a series of semi-random mutations than cumulative progress towards the truth. Althusser appears to have a similar conception. However, he then wants to have it both ways by insisting on the

absolute sanctity of the precious 'epistemological break' in Marx's writing; that is, the point at which Marx passed from ideology to science.

Anyway, my own feeling is that Marxism doesn't stand or fall with being a science. If you *do* claim it as a science you're setting yourself up to have it called a pseudo-science or one that's already been falsified. Obviously much that Marx wrote did not come to pass in exactly the manner he thought it would. And yet he was probably the greatest western thinker to ever attempt a global critique of capitalism. Given that capitalism surely remains the chief adversary of humanity in the 21st century, his continued relevance should be obvious.

It is rather a sceptical claim to say that Marxism, or any social science could be a 'science' in a way, but it's clear that Althusser defines science, or practice in general, more broadly than something like physics, as the movement from what he defines as Generality I (the raw material) to Generality III (scientific knowledge) through Generality II (the 'theory' of the science at the moment in consideration, i.e the corpus of its concepts), which we do see with Marxism. I think perhaps for the rest of the review I'll write a bit about some key terms and concepts that Althusser employs, particularly overdetermination, since these are the most important ideas he outlines, and also evidently the most confusing ones:

For Althusser, unlike the simple Hegelian contradiction, which is the self-alienation and then the subsequent unification of the Idea, in every existing society there always exists a multitude of contradictions. However, this is not to say that there is no unity, because there is always a 'principal' contradiction that exists alongside secondary contradictions. These two are both necessary to one another, and there's no way of merely 'deriving' the secondary contradictions as epiphenomena of the primary contradiction. This is what Althusser means by overdetermination (surdétermination).

Taking off the basic concepts of base and super-structure, Althusser believes that the elements of the super-structure, i.e political, religious, philosophical, ideological, all have an effect on the structuring of society, but that the economic base is ultimately 'determined in the last instance' (déterminé en le dernière instance)—in turn, this determination in the last instance of the economy determines which element of the super-structure—economic, social, political, cultural, will be dominant in a given society, what can be called the structure in dominance.

Therefore here we have a reciprocal, mutual relation, and this all comprises of what Althusser calls a pre-given complex structured whole (structure complexe-déjà-donnée).

Overdetermination exists according to three various processes, non-antagonism, where the overdetermination of contradictions exists in the form of displacements, that changes a primary contradiction to a secondary one, but where the structure in dominance remains the same. Then to antagonism, where overdetermination is condensed in an acute class conflict or a theoretical crisis, that becomes the basis for an explosion, an entire reconstruction of the entire society.

Overall, however, I'm limiting myself to exclusive one essay in the book ('On the Materialist Dialectic'), but there are six more brilliant essays that deal with a multitude of other topics, and no matter what kind of Marxist you are I'm certain there will be something of interest for you to find here.

In between rigorous analysis of the crucial differences between Hegel's dialectic and Marx's dialectic, contradictions and overdeterminations, and in between amazing analysis of the differences of marxist materialism, pre-marxist materialism, and socialist humanism, in between all this, the essay about Bertolazzi's and Brecht's plays is pure beauty 💔

"...forms of temporality that do not achieve any mutual integration, which have no relation to one another, which coexist and interconnect, but never meet each other, so to speak; with lived elements which interlace in a dialectic which is localized, separate and apparently ungrounded; works marked by an internal dissociation, an unresolved alterity.

The dynamic of this specific latent structure, and in particular, the coexistence without any explicit relation of a dialectical temporality and non-dialectical temporality, is the basis for a true critique of the illusions of consciousness (which always believes itself to be dialectical and treats itself as dialectical), the basis for a true critique of the false dialectic (conflict, tragedy, etc.) by the disconcerting reality which is its basis and which is awaiting recognition.

... there is no dialectic of consciousness, which could reach reality itself by virtue of its own contradictions. For consciousness does not accede to the real through its own internal development, but by the radical discovery of what is - other than itself."

This is the first Althusser I've read. I'd like to give it the benefit of doubt: I doubt this is his best work, and I doubt I have understood it entirely. As far as I can tell here Althusser wants to make a theoretical approach to Marxian materialism. By the time of *The German Ideology*, and certainly by the time of *Capital*, Marx held that the distribution of wealth determines the quality or kinds of philosophy dominant in society. But there can be no sense or understanding of materialism without philosophy. This is where Althusser comes in. If philosophy appears as a product of the distribution of wealth, there must first be some conception of wealth, class etc., and this concept is itself philosophical. This is what Althusser is after: prior philosophy and prior ideology--with a view to a future Marxist philosophy. Unfortunately he spends more time qualifying his own terminology than philosophy per se. There's nothing conclusive here. At all times For Marx is a work in progress – an approach to philosophy, or a series of philosophies made to delineate the very notion of philosophy.

Reading *Capital* in this tremendous work, Althusser (and Etienne Balibar) argues that Marx's "*Capital*" marks the emergence of a new "science of history," a new mode of knowledge that sprang out of the author's encounters with his philosophical predecessors but which couldn't be recognized as such precisely because the answer that it provides is directed towards a question not available in his empiricist philosophical antecedents. Key to Althusser's recuperation of this new science in Marx is the manner in which Marx's thought fundamentally restructures the field through two recognitions: the rejection of the separation between subject and object in empiricist thought, and his understanding of knowledge as production, as that which both adheres to the essence of its object (always-already-there) and which itself produces that object.

"*Reading Capital*" is not only a wonderful reading of "*Capital*" itself, attending to its nuances with admirable rigor and substantial pay-off, but the symptomatic method of reading that Althusser identifies in Marxist praxis is an essential articulation of duty and complicity for any student of inquiry, Marxist or otherwise.